

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH CAPTAIN ROBERT WAGNER, COMMANDING OFFICER OF THE U.S. COAST GUARD CUTTER DALLAS SUBJECT: AFRICA PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM MODERATOR: LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 9:00 A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, AUGUST 1, 2008

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LT. CRAGG: Today our guest is Captain Robert Wagner. He's the commanding officer of the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Dallas. Captain Wagner will be talking about support of Africa Partnership Station.

So with that, sir, I'm going to go ahead and turn it over to you, if you'd like to start with an opening statement.

CAPT. WAGNER: Sure. Well, first of all, this is a new opportunity for me, so I hope I don't break any ground rules here. Let me, I guess, briefly start by saying about what Dallas has done for the last couple of months while we were supporting APS.

As you may know, APS is part of, I think, the Global Fleet Station Initiative of the United States Navy, particularly in West and Central Africa. And for the last two months, Dallas has operated with the navies and coast guards of Cape Verde, Sao Tome and Principe, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana and Senegal.

And we've done a little bit of the gamut from some of the basic training, which has typically been associated with ship visits like this, to working with our counterparts in Cape Verde for an actual law enforcement operation in which we spent 10 days patrolling Cape Verde's exclusive economic zone with a law enforcement detachment of the Cape Verde coast guard aboard.

That was the first time -- one moment, please. This was the first time that a foreign law enforcement detachment has been deployed from a U.S. military ship to exercise another nation's sovereignty over their waters. I think we've engaged with several hundred host nation students throughout our visits.

We've given training in everything from maritime law enforcement or -- (inaudible) -- search and seizure to search and rescue to migrant interdiction. We conducted some basic at-sea operations with the Equatorial Guinean navy, which I believe is the first time in many years that the United States and Equatorial Guinean navy have worked together like that.

So it really has been a rewarding opportunity for my crew and myself. And with that, I guess I'll open it up to any questions.

LT. CRAGG: Great, sir. We have three bloggers on the call. We also have Commander Scott Miller on the call as well. He's the Sixth Fleet public affairs officer, just so you know.

CAPT. WAGNER: Okay, great. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: We're going to start with Jim, who was the first one on the line. Andrew was next, and David was third.

So, Jim, go ahead and start.

Q Good evening, Captain. Jim Dolbow with the Unofficial Coast Guard Blog.

What would you say are some of the lessons learned so far in your deployment?

CAPT. WAGNER: Well, let's see. I think probably one of the biggest lessons learned is that the countries that we've been engaging with may not have the most resources in the world, but they certainly have a lot of desire to use what they have to the best of their abilities.

And I think the piece that we have is the lessons -- they have very similar challenges for maritime security to the United States, when you look at some of the threats such as illegal immigration, drug trafficking, pollution, and some safety concerns like search and rescue as well. So there's a lot of similarities there. We just are helping them to develop some of their capabilities and capacities to be able to counter those challenges.

Q Okay.

LT. CRAGG: Do you have another one, or do you want me to go straight to Andrew, Jim?

Q You can go to Andrew.

Q It's just the three of us, so I'm going to ask two.

Captain, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin from Naval Institute's Proceedings and the new website Get the Gouge.

I've got two questions here, sir. When you pull into a port, what kind of reception do you get from the locals, from the civilians? What does the media say about you? And two, off Equatorial Guinea, are you doing any oil field type of defenses or any oil defenses?

CAPT. WAGNER: Well, first of all, I'll say that every place we went to, we got an extremely warm welcome. That's really -- it's greatly appreciated. The crew enjoyed getting out and seeing the countries where we could get them out as far out as we could and experiencing the culture. For Americans, it's a unique opportunity to get out to some of the West African areas; so, again, very, very warm welcome, both from the civilian population as well as the military. They generally, I think, enjoyed having us there, from what we could tell.

As far as working with the Equatorial Guineans, one of the exercises that we did when we got underway with them, it was a search and rescue exercise.

It was a law enforcement exercise. And then there was a security drill on the threat against one of the offshore platforms.

And really the exercise itself wasn't so much of the U.S. military being involved with the Equatorial Guineans to protect the platforms. It was really how the platform that they suspected of threat could contact the Equatorial Guinean navy and how they would respond to that threat.

So when I look at that exercise, the real take-away from that was the fact that the petrochemical industry and the Equatorial Guinean navy were talking and operating together.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: (Inaudible) -- if they can, if they can put their phone on mute, if they can. I can hear -- it's wind or I can hear breathing; I can't tell the difference. I apologize. Andrew, if you don't have any more questions, I'm going to move on to David. And then we're just going to continue round-robin.

Q Hi. It's David with Wire's Danger Room Blog. David Axe, sorry. So, sir, thanks for taking the time to speak to us. Can you hear me?

CAPT. WAGNER: Yes, sir, I can.

Q Great. So why the Coast Guard? It seems sort of an unusual -- you know, an expeditionary mission for what is sort of nominally a domestic law enforcement agency.

CAPT. WAGNER: Well, keep in mind, please, David, that the Coast Guard is more than just a domestic law enforcement agency. We are one of the five branches of the armed forces. The Coast Guard has been supporting the Navy --- I may not know the exact year, but it's been since the late 1990s -- with various combatant commanders through missions like this. I know three years ago, when I was commanding officer of the Cutter Bear, we were the first U.S. Coast Guard cutter in quite some time to actually deploy down into the Gulf of Guinea.

Also last year -- last October, I believe it was -- the three service chiefs went ahead and -- the naval service chiefs went ahead and signed a cooperative strategy for 21st century sea power, which was how the different services -- the unique skills of the services could be brought together to advance U.S. strategic goals within the maritime domain.

So our deployment really fits right into some of the things that we've been doing for over a decade now, where our leadership sees us going. If you look at, again, the number of threats that these countries face -- migrant interdiction, drug interdiction, pollution response -- these are all things that the Coast Guard does in its missions on a daily basis.

So mission set for these navies and coast guards are similar to what the U.S. Coast Guard does and even some of the resources that these countries have. Generally small boats or smaller patrol boats are what their fleets are comprised of, and not some of the larger surface combatants that the Navy has. So really we're actually a pretty good fit for these type of missions.

Q Great. Thanks.

LT. CRAGG: David, do you have any more questions, or can we just go on to Jim?

Q We can come back around to me.

LT. CRAGG: Roger that.

Jim?

Q Captain, I've got a question about winning the hearts and minds of the local people. Can you give us a little more detail about the visit of your crew to the school for the deaf in Ghana?

CAPT. WAGNER: Sure. We did a community relations project when we were in Segundi (sp), Ghana. It was basically going ahead and repainting the school. It was -- I can't remember off the top of my head. It was a couple of dozen of the crew, as I recall. I don't remember the exact numbers. They went out there and spent an all-day project. And really it was rewarding for our folks as well to be able to go out there and give a little bit to the community, also to be able to interact with the children.

One of the things I look at with community relations projects like this are some of these children that we deal with throughout the countries -- and we've done several community relations projects -- are ways to interact with the future leaders, and basically at an early age expose them to Americans and show them that in many cases Americans aren't bad people. And maybe they'll remember that "When I was 10 years old or 12 years old, the Americans came to my school. They did some work at my school. They maybe handed out a couple of soccer balls and played with us for a bit." And maybe that's a lasting impression that will carry on as they take on more responsibilities throughout their life.

Q Thank you, Captain.

LT. CRAGG: Andrew?

Q Yes, sir, Captain. Andrew Lubin again.

With what you're doing is the maritime version of counterinsurgency, how were you training your sailors before they arrived off the coast of Cape Verde or Senegal? How were you getting them spun up for this?

CAPT. WAGNER: Well, Andrew, we look at a lot of the force protection training to make sure we're able to keep our people safe and how to react if something happens. But more importantly, I think it's cultural awareness training. When we come over here, we certainly want to be making friends. And we don't want to make friends or we can't make friends if we're offending them by doing something that runs counter to their culture. We cannot just do APS but do some of the other areas that we'll be deployed at. We're seeing a wide gamut of what the cultural experiences are going to be. So I think that was probably one of the biggest things to prepare the crew for.

Q Okay, thank you.

LT. CRAGG: David?

Q Great. David again with Wired's Danger Room Blog.

So how's the Dallas holding up? She's not a new cutter, and it's a long way to go.

CAPT. WAGNER: Yes, sir. Believe me, we know that. (Laughs.) Dallas is almost 41 years old here. And we went ahead and had extended in port for us, which is about three and a half months, to prepare for this mission. Believe me, the crew was working extremely hard and we had a lot of our support element back in the States getting us ready for this to overcome some engineering problems that we've had.

We've had our challenges. We've had a number of casualties. I've had a couple of fires in the engine room throughout the deployment. And I can tell you right now, I'm located in Gibraltar and we're here to have some repairs done before we continue on with the rest of our trip. So, yeah, these ships are old. They take a lot to keep them running.

Q Okay, great. Thanks.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, back around again. Jim?

Q Captain, what kind of cultural awareness training did your crew receive prior to the deployment to become familiar with the local customs of the various countries?

CAPT. WAGNER: Well, again, we're looking at -- some of the places that we've gone to, from -- Dakar has a heavy Islamic population. We've gone to countries in West Africa that have a French influence, English influence and Portuguese influence; so, again, just some of the basic customs of how to interact with people.

I guess probably one of the most -- (inaudible) -- was, in some of these countries over here, it's not unusual to see two men walking hand in hand. And that's something in the United States you certainly wouldn't expect to see. But if your folks are reacting improperly to that, then you're not going to be able to work effectively with our host nation guests.

Q Thank you, Captain.

LT. CRAGG: Andrew?

Q Yes. Captain, are you on your way back, then? And how long have you been out?

CAPT. WAGNER: We left our home port of Charleston the third week in May, and we're not close to coming home yet. We still have a long way to go. But we are finished with our efforts with APS in West Africa.

Q Are you picking up another mission, or are you solo?

CAPT. WAGNER: No, we're going to be continuing throughout the Sixth Fleet AOR in support of their theater security cooperation initiatives.

Q Okay, thank you.

LT. CRAGG: David. Q Hi. David Axe again; Wired's Danger Room Blog.

So engine fires, huh? Engine room fires? Can you tell me more about the special measures you've had to take to look after the material condition of the ship?

CAPT. WAGNER: Yes, sir, David. We had, again, a lot of preparation to make sure we had the parts and equipment on board, just because we're operating so far away from our logistics chain. And again, a 41-year-old ship, a lot of the parts that we need aren't exactly available on the shelf someplace. So we tried to keep as much with us as we could.

The fires that we've had were -- I can't say they were major fires, but any time you have a fire at sea, I guess it's major; it's all relative. But again, these were things that the crew was able to effect repairs and get the ship back underway as quickly as possible.

Q How's the -- I hate this word, morale, but it seems like you're a long way from home. The conditions are rough. How are attitudes among the crew?

CAPT. WAGNER: David, we are already about -- these ships normally deploy for about 75 days on average for -- (inaudible) -- patrol and then we're back home. We're right about that right now for this trip. And I've got to tell you, I've never seen morale so high in all my life. I think it has a lot to do with the mission that we've been doing and the crew finding it rewarding. And also, I just have to tell you, I just have a fantastic crew. They've been put through a lot. They've been tested. And they just do a fantastic job. So I couldn't be more proud to be sailing with these folks.

Q Great. Thanks.

LT. CRAGG: And, sir, if I can ask a question, I don't know if this was addressed. This is the first time that the Coast Guard participated in something like APS. And what do you think the crew learned from this experience?

CAPT. WAGNER: Right. Well, again, APS is kind of a new title. I think the Navy has been having some engagement in West Africa, an emphasis in here for about three to four years now. And I think we're actually the third Coast Guard cutter to deploy to West Africa since 2005.

What the crew has really taken away from this is they have a new appreciation for America, I think. And we have a site, if anybody's familiar with, Fred's Place. It's kind of a Coast Guard website. And we have a photo essay and some blogs that are posted on there. And I'd invite anybody to go on there and just see some of the things that my crew has (stated ?) about what they think about the mission. But many of them have been touched by what we've been able to do, the people they've been able to work with, and just in general the work we're doing with the African nations over here.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

Does anybody -- do any of the bloggers have any other follow-up questions?

Q I have a quick one. Captain, Andrew again.

You've taken your crew to some really interesting and really different countries. Have you been able to stop at any one of them for liberty port? And what country do you think your crews enjoyed most?

CAPT. WAGNER: Wow, that's a tough question. We really have gotten folks on the beach at every place we've gone to. You know, I think some of the places -- probably the more popular thing that the folks have been able to do just recently in Dakar, Senegal, there was a wildlife preserve not too far away, a couple of hours away from Dakar, and a number of the crew were able to go over there and kind of almost like a mini-safari. So that was something that was really interesting. And then I know in Ghana they were able to go to a rain forest and spend a day there; I think a lot of folks really just going out and enjoying the culture that West Africa has to offer. And it really is; it's fascinating to go there and to see some things.

We had some cadets who actually went out and -- gee, I think that was in Dakar -- but went out to a Friday evening party, like a block party type thing. We met up with some Army ROTC students, and that was going to be part of their cultural experience. My cadets went over and did that. So just getting out and seeing some of the open-air markets and seeing how the people of West Africa live is just really -- it's been fascinating.

Q Great, thank you.

LT. CRAGG: I know there was somebody that dropped off and came back. Did anybody else join us that is new to the call? Okay. Anybody else have any follow-up questions?

Q I don't have any. This is Jim.

Q No, I'm good. Thanks.

LT. CRAGG: David?

Q I'm good. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. So with that, we have a couple of minutes before the show is officially wrapped up, so if you'd like to end with any final statements.

CAPT. WAGNER: Okay. Well, thank you. Well, again, this has been a great opportunity to help get the word out about APS and how the Coast Guard can support this. I think it has been, again, just a fantastic experience. Three years ago I came down to this part of the world; to be able to come back and just to see the changes that have been made.

And I think what I've been able to see is that these reoccurring engagements, like APS, really do make a difference; Cape Verde in particular. Repetitive visits by U.S. ships, some of our allied partners going on, helping to train up the Cape Verde coast guard in a classroom or a static environment within the harbor, and then be able to take the next step and conduct operations at sea; going into Equatorial Guinea, again, just seeing tremendous growth and seeing their navy grow from what was a couple of patrol boats to now -- we actually got underway with an exercise where they had five boats that got underway with us for the exercises.

So really I think APS does make a difference. It's great to see. And I really hope I can have an opportunity to come back three, four years from now and see how we've been able to continue to help these countries improve their capabilities and capacities to really counter what is a global concern, because when you think about that, 90 percent of the world's trade flows over the seas, and it doesn't take much for an event in one part of the world to impact the economy in the rest of the world. Helping these countries develop some of those capabilities and capacities to prevent those things from happening is very rewarding.

So I guess that's about it from Dallas, unless anybody has any more questions.

Q No, I'm good. Captain, thank you much for the time today.

Q Thanks.

Q Thank you, Captain.

END.